Faculty Research Summaries

Political Contexts Surrounding Title X, the National Family Planning Program, Over the Past Four Decades: Oral Histories with Key Stakeholders in Florida

Background:

Family planning is one of the top 10 public health successes in the 20th century. Family planning services can help with proper birth spacing; prevent unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs); prevent the need for abortion; and screen for certain cancers (i.e. breast and cervical cancer) which can help with early detection and treatment. Most important, contraceptives allow women and men to choose when, if, and how many children they want. In 1970, the federal government enacted The Family Planning Services and Population Research Act (commonly referred to as Title X) to help make comprehensive, voluntary family planning services available to those who need and want it. Title X funded clinics are a critical part of public health as they often provide services to those who need it most - particularly young, low-income, and minority women and other underserved populations.

Despite its many important public health achievements, the Title X program continues to receive scrutiny and face political, financial, and social challenges. This study conducted 6 oral histories with key stakeholders in Florida who played important administrative, programmatic and, legislative roles regarding the family planning programs to find what they thought about how politics has both supported and challenged Title X’s ability to provide these critical public health services to all those in need.

Main Findings:

The following political themes emerged from the oral histories regarding Title X:

Abortion

- All key informants were frustrated by the issue of abortion and thought it negatively affected Title X services.

“Well, I think the reason the topic keeps being brought back up is because interest groups don’t even want there to be a Title X, and in order to make it more politically charged, they try to change Title X’s focus with a pro-abortion focus.”

Adolescents

- Adolescents were often identified as a political challenge regarding:
  - Parental Notification
  - School-based clinics
  - Abstinence-only education

“I think it is real red herring. It is something that if the legislators can’t do something about important issues they can throw in an adolescent..., and it seems to cover up the $50 billion shortfall in the budget.”

Politics and Administration

- Politics and administration greatly affected Title X, with priorities and agendas changing depending on who was in office. Sometimes there was a disconnect when the U.S. President was from one political party, and the state Governor from the other. Sometimes special opposition groups were a concern:

“I distinctly remember that we would be meeting them to try and get them to agree, because they very much supported maternal-child health activities. They wanted to seek care for women and care for women who were pregnant and care for the children. So it was a question of how to fit family planning into that so they would not oppose us in family planning issues.”
Family Planning Methods

- Particular family planning methods were mentioned, most often emergency contraception (EC), as affecting Title X because of general lack of knowledge about them.

Implications

Community organizations can play a key role in advocating for family planning services. Community members can help by reaching out to their professional organizations and elected officials and ensuring they understand the significance of family planning in promoting the health and well-being of women, children, and families.

Citation